

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States under President George H. W. Bush (1924–) formed a coalition of thirty-nine countries to repel the invaders.⁷ Kuwait and nearby Saudi Arabia were leading sources of oil for the Western world and had to be protected. The Bush administration recognized this as a territorial war. The enemy was pushed back with a loss of as many as 100,000 Iraqi troops. A cease-fire agreement was signed on April 6, 1991.

The Gulf Coalition chose not to attempt an overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime by invading Iraq and taking over Baghdad. This would have created a counter-insurgency war similar to Vietnam. Also, the United States and its allies would have found themselves in the middle of a prolonged civil war between the ruling Sunni Muslim population and the larger Shiite Muslim plurality.

The United States responded to the 9/11 terrorist attacks by destroying the al-Qaeda training camp in

Afghanistan in October 2001.⁸ But what should be done next? Al-Qaeda was not a country. It had no territory and it had no military. It was a loose coalition of Islamist extremists from many nations that at various times had operatives in Afghanistan, Germany, Great Britain, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sudan, the United States, and Yemen. One possibility was diplomacy and limited resource (DLR) war, focused on killing or capturing the al-Qaeda leadership. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri were thought to be hiding in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region. Instead, the United States under President George W. Bush (1946–) chose a territorial war. It overthrew the Taliban government in Afghanistan with the intent of establishing a Muslim democracy. This added “nation building” to the task at hand: defeating al-Qaeda.

Another Iraq War

Before the wisdom of this strategy could be determined, the Bush administration inexplicably declared war on Iraq.⁹ This was an odd decision, since the Iraqis had been severely beaten in the 1991 Gulf War, incurring significant damage both to their military and to their infrastructure. Restrictions on their oil revenues by the United Nations greatly limited the availability of resources for hostile activities. More importantly, the United States maintained continuous control over Iraqi airspace with fighter planes armed with missiles. These planes could cover Iraq 24/7 from bases in Turkey and from aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. They could take out anything in Iraq on short notice. This Policy of

Containment¹⁰ carried minimal risk of life or limb to any American and cost about \$1.5 billion a year, about what it would cost per week to fight the Iraq War.

Like Vietnam, the 2003 Iraq War was a triumph of ideology over reality. It was pushed by two groups of ideologues. Traditional hawkish Republicans believed that the administration of George W. Bush's father, George H.W. Bush, had blown an opportunity at the end of the Gulf War to help the Shiite opposition in Iraq overthrow Saddam Hussein. Neo-conservatives also supported this aggressive action against Iraq. The neo-conservative movement included many pro-Israeli Democrats who wanted to establish a precedent for aggressive American military action in the world in anticipation of US forces someday protecting Israel. These two groups created such a clamor for invading Iraq that most public discourse was drowned out. Threats plus accusations of unpatriotic motives or cowardice stifled any remaining dissent. Saddam Hussein was accused of harboring weapons of mass destruction. Pro-war ideologues accepted any "evidence" that supported this, no matter how unreliable. For example, an Iraqi exile named Ahmed Chalabi was a key source of information. Chalabi was intent on replacing Saddam Hussein in Iraq and was known by the US intelligence community to be deceitful. But no evidence of weapons of mass destruction was found before, during, or after the war.